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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 BANGKOK 000263

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR SENIOR MILITARY VISITORS TO
THAILAND DURING COBRA GOLD

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Coming visits by component commanders, and other senior leaders of various U.S. military commands will afford a chance to affirm the United States Government's commitment to working with a democratically elected Thai government, to promoting a continued strong bilateral relationship, and to affirming our support for important areas of our mil-mil relationship such as the Defense Reform Management Study (DRMS), Cobra Gold, and Thailand's deployment of peacekeepers to Darfur. End Summary.

ENDURING BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

¶2. (SBU) The Thai public closely watched our recent Presidential election, and the results received much scrutiny regarding the potential impact on U.S.-Thai relations. Thai government officials have expressed strong interest in hearing assessments of the transition to a new administration and U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia. We have stressed to the Thai we do not anticipate significant changes in our bilateral relationship due to the history and strength of our alliance and the nature of long-standing U.S.-Thai security, economic, and cultural bonds. However, the changing generations in both Thailand and the U.S. require both sides work hard to maintain the vibrancy in the relationship.

THAI POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT - YELLOW AND RED

¶3. (C) The December dissolution of the People's Power Party (PPP), which led to the fall of the government of former PM Somchai and installation of the Democrat-led coalition government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, has appeared to quiet, at least temporarily, the political situation. Gone are the street protests by the anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) which shut down Bangkok's airports for a week and occupied the formal seat of government for over three months. But the basic deep split in society and the body politic remains, with the traditional royalist elite, urban middle class, Bangkok, and the south on one side ("yellow" in shorthand) and the political allies of ex-PM Thaksin, currently a fugitive abroad, along with largely rural supporters in the North and Northeast ("red")

on the other.

¶4. (C) Prime Minister Abhisit is off to a reasonably good start in his first month in office, but his government faces significant policy challenges given the current economic situation in Thailand and globally. Abhisit and the Democrats also have to contend with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's continued attempts to influence the political environment from abroad and to recover assets of his that were seized by the government. Moreover, demonstrations by United Front of Democracy for Dictatorship "redshirts" loyal to the former PM will test the new government.

¶5. (C) Calling for new elections would not appear to be a viable solution to political divide, and political turmoil could very well persist for years. The steadiest figure on the political stage over the past months has been Army Commander Anupong Paochinda, who steadfastly rejected pressure from both sides for the army to intervene in the political stalemate, either to conduct a coup d'etat or to clear the streets of protesters. We continue to stress to Thai interlocutors the negative ramifications of a coup and the need for all parties to avoid violence and respect democratic norms within the framework of the constitution and rule of law.

¶6. (C) King Bhumibol turned 81 on December 5. Many had anticipated his commentary for his annual address to the nation on the eve of his birthday; his address was canceled,

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however, after he fell ill with bronchitis. (Note: The King was hospitalized for a period of weeks in late 2007 for appeared to be a minor stroke. End note.) The Palace has since announced the King's recovery; as of late, he has been shown on television more frequently in meetings with both foreigners and Thais. The King's passing, whenever that may be, will shock Thailand. Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn is the King's designated heir. However, the current King's enormous personal prestige, the lack of a precedent for royal succession during the modern era (King Bhumibol has been on the throne since 1946), and changing sentiment about the proper role of the institution in the 21st century suggest that the transition will be difficult.

THAI ECONOMY STRUGGLES TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES

¶7. (SBU) Over the past few years, Thailand's economy has been growing at a moderate pace, though the long-running political uncertainty has stifled domestic investment, hamstrung government stimulus programs, and kept Thailand from keeping up with other ASEAN nations. The worldwide economic slowdown of recent months has hit Thailand particularly hard as exports, the one bright spot in GDP growth, have fallen, causing growth forecasts for 2009 to be ratcheted down from 4% to less than 2%. This dreary scenario was made much worse by the November airport closures, which devastated Thailand's large tourism and convention industries just at the beginning of the high season.

¶8. (SBU) Historically, Thailand's economy has hummed along unaffected by frequent political squabbling, but the recent willingness of political actors to take actions that clearly damage the economy and the nation's international image is changing that tenet. Thailand's largest foreign investors, Japanese in particular, have expressed dismay at the new turn in events. The full effect of the airport closures has not yet shown up in the data, but FDI (especially from the U.S.) was already trending down for 2008. The new government is well aware of these challenges, has made an extraordinary effort to put together an economically reasonable and politically savvy economic stimulus package, and is reaching out to the foreign business community to re-built Thailand's image as a good place to do business.

IMPORTANT MILITARY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM, ACCESS

¶9. (SBU) The long-standing U.S.-Thai military partnership provides the U.S. with unique benefits. These include distinctive force projection options, the possibility to conduct training exercises that are nearly impossible to match elsewhere in Asia, the opportunity to advance U.S. strategic goals, access to military leaders in a nation that is trying to strengthen democratic institutions, a willing participant in international peacekeeping operations, and a partner in medical research which has produced widely-used vaccines.

¶10. (C) Thailand's willingness to allow the United States to use Utapao Naval Air Station as the hub for our regional assistance program was key to making the 2004 tsunami and the 2008 Cyclone Nargis relief operations successful. While those high-profile relief operations highlighted publicly the value of access to Utapao, the air base is used regularly for flights in support of critical U.S. military operations to strategic areas of the world. Thailand also provides valued port access with U.S. naval vessels making calls, primarily at Laem Chabang and Sattahip, over forty times per year for exercises and visits.

COBRA GOLD AND THE MILITARY EXERCISE PROGRAM

¶11. (C) By means of access to good military base

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infrastructure and large areas to conduct unrestricted operations, Thailand gives the U.S. military a platform for exercises unique in Asia. Thai leaders are far more willing to host multinational exercises than are other countries in Asia. Unlike Japan, which only hosts annual bilateral exercises due to legal prohibitions over collective security, or the Philippines, where planning for multinational exercises has been difficult, or Australia, which refuses to multilateralize Tandem Thrust, the Thai government encourages multinational exercises as a way to show regional leadership. This has allowed us to use exercises in Thailand to further key U.S. objectives, such as supporting Japan's growing military role in Asia and engaging the Indonesian and Singaporean militaries.

¶12. (C) Cobra Gold, the capstone event of our exercise program, is PACOM's largest annual multi-lateral exercise and for 28 years has served to strengthen our relations with Thailand, highlight our commitment to Southeast Asia, and provide exceptional training opportunities for our troops. The event has evolved over the years and now facilitates important objectives such as promoting a greater role in the Asian Pacific region for Japan and Singapore and re-establishing a partner role with Indonesia. Cobra Gold is key to building partner nation capacity in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, especially at a time when U.S. forces face other global commitments. We have also been able to incorporate into Cobra Gold a robust Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative (GPOI) event with active participation of Indonesia and Singapore. Our other primary exercises with the Thai military are CARAT and COPE TIGER.

DEFENSE REFORM

¶13. (C) We have been working closely with the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters (RTARF) on the U.S.-funded Defense Resource Management System (DRMS) project which will help rationalize the Thai military's procurement and other resource needs. We use every appropriate opportunity to emphasize our desire to work closely with the Thai military leadership to accelerate DRMS process. Phase II of this process will begin the first week of March following the

ASEAN summit scheduled for Thailand.

PEACEKEEPING EFFORTS

¶14. (C) Thailand has been an active contributor in peacekeeping missions, best known for leading forces in the UNTAET mission in East Timor. The RTARF has been a close partner for us as the Thai government continues preparations to deploy a battalion of peacekeeping troops to Darfur as UNAMID. With deployment currently scheduled for mid-2009, we have continued to underscore to the leadership of the Thai military that we stand ready to assist the Thai again where possible.

SOUTHERN THAILAND: SECURITY AND JUSTICE

¶15. (C) The Thai military, since General Anupong became Army Commander, has taken a more assertive role in trying to quell the ethnic Malay Muslim ethno-nationalist insurgency in southern Thailand, a region that has witnessed episodic violence since its incorporation into Siam/Thailand in 1902. Regional violence has claimed more than 3000 lives since January 2004, when the violence began to escalate. The root causes of the insurgency -- government neglect, human rights abuses, and a lack of social justice, combined with a desire for some form of self-determination, have not been addressed by any Thai government to this point.

¶16. (C) While the Thai military has so far focused mostly on trying to resolve the difficult security situation in the

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South, with increased tactical success in security sweeps, occasional abuses by security forces have added to the sense of grievance and lack of justice by the local populace. Efforts by civilian government ministries to solve the root causes of injustice and the feeling of disenfranchisement by the Thai-Malay majority in the three southern provinces have so far lagged. While the Abhisit government appears set to adopt an integrated government approach to solving the insurgency with budgetary and policy decision making responsibility possibly transferred to the Office of the Prime Minister, it remains unclear how the civil-military dynamic will change.

¶17. (C) The RTG has made clear its hesitancy in accepting any direct USG role in the South. The Embassy maintains a three-pronged focus to improve our military cooperation in order to address the violence in the South:

- 1) Using our exercise and training program to improve the professional and operational skills of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, especially the Thai Army;
- 2) Helping the Thai break down stovepipes between the Thai military, police forces, and civilian agencies;
- 3) Doing everything we can to ensure the Thai respect international human rights norms as they counter the violence.

BORDER CONFLICT WITH CAMBODIA

¶18. (C) Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya's January 26 visit to Phnom Penh produced encouraging statements by all sides regarding the border dispute that is centered on overlapping claims to territory adjacent to Preah Vihear temple. The next round of talks under the auspices of the Foreign Ministry-led Joint Border Commission (JBC) are scheduled for February 2, and the two nations' defense ministers are scheduled to meet February 6 to discuss the redeployment of soldiers stationed at the temple. Despite continued talks between Thailand and Cambodia, we are not optimistic for quick resolution to the dispute. Difficult issues lay at the heart of the matter, and political conflict in Bangkok may make tough decisions more difficult for the Thai government. We continue to stress to the Thai

interlocutors that the dispute should be resolved peacefully and bilaterally.

REFUGEE/MIGRANT CONCERNS: LAO HMONG AND ROHINGYA

¶19. (C) Thailand has hosted millions of refugees since the IndoChina wars and currently has more than 150,000 refugees from Burma in camps along the Thai-Burma border. The RTARF has the lead on resolving the difficult problem of the thousands of Hmong from Laos who arrived in 2006-2007 seeking resettlement in the U.S.; many of them likely would not qualify for refugee status and will be returned to Laos. However, the Thai government has so far failed to set up a transparent screening process for the Hmong currently in a camp in Petchaboon province; we believe that a portion of the group may have a legitimate claim to refugee status and could face harsh treatment by the Lao government if returned. Some are former fighters (or their descendants) allied with the U.S. against the communist Pathet Lao during the IndoChina wars. We want to take every opportunity to underscore to the RTARF the importance of transparently handling the Lao Hmong cases.

¶20. (C) Media reports in recent weeks over Thai actions regarding Rohingya "boat people" have resulted in strong criticism of the RTG and its policy toward groups that attempt to enter Thailand, primarily from Burma. Rohingya typically cross from Burma's Northern Rakhine state into Bangladesh to board vessels bound for Malaysia. This year many have instead found their way to the Ranong area in Thailand, the Andaman Islands of India, and Aceh Province, Indonesia. According to various reports, several hundred

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Rohingya went missing from at least one vessel encountered by the Indian coast guard off Port Blair in the Andaman Islands in early January. Survivors have alleged being towed out to sea and being abandoned by Thai military or marine police vessels.

¶21. (C) A recent visit to the Ranong area by Embassy RefCoord suggests to us that two loosely defined groupings of unpaid civilian defense volunteers drawn from fishing villages were involved in the alleged mistreatment of the Rohingya, but that they received general policy direction and some financial support from the Thai Army-led local Internal Security Operations Center. It remains unclear what boats may have been involved in towing the Rohingya back out to sea. We continue to stress to our contacts in the Thai government that Thailand should provide access for UNHCR to Rohingya boat people who reach Thai shores, and that push-outs to sea are not consistent with basic humanitarian principles.

THE INCREASING ROLE OF CHINA

¶22. (C) Thai leaders continue to develop closer relations with China while simultaneously emphasizing the vital role of the U.S. in the region. While Thai military links with the United States are deeper and far more apparent than Sino-Thai links, China's growing influence in Thailand and Southeast Asia is evident in business, the arts, the media, and the military. The Thai military has a range of Chinese weapons systems in its arsenal; the PLA Navy is interested in closer links with the Thai navy, and China has worked with Thailand to improve air defense equipment provided to Thailand in the late 1980's. In 2007 and 2008, Thai and Chinese special forces conducted joint exercises, and other mil-to-mil exchanges have expanded in recent years, as has the number of bilateral military VIP visits. A yet to be disclosed marine corps exercise between China and Thailand near the eastern seaboard port of Sattahip in the April-May timeframe highlights the continuing push by China to expand their mil-to-mil relations with Thailand's military.

